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Dear Dr. Lederberg,

Your note of January 11th was greatly appreciated. Few people seem to share this "crazy" interest of mine, and it never ceases to amaze me that more time is not devoted to the study of science and medicine in the Third Reich.

Actually, I have done very little work on genetics and geneticists in Nazi Germany, largely because genetics seems to have had very little to do with eugenics as practiced by the Nazis. Obviously, the debates over eugenic ideas which went on in Europe and in the U.S. in the 1920's were based on the premise that diseases can be inherited in some instances and that these inheritable diseases were spreading through the population. But as far as I can tell, no one claimed to understand the genetic mechanisms by which those diseases were inherited.

Years before the Nazis came to power, clinical and statistical surveys by physicians and certain state institutions suggested that the German population was degenerating due to the spread of common inheritable diseases. No one understood the problem, but many felt that it had to be dealt with anyway. And so, for example, when the government of Weimar Germany collected information in the late '20's in order to form an official opinion on the question of compulsory eugenic sterilization, no geneticists were consulted. The science of genetics really had little to offer eugenicists in the way of support or opposition. All that the geneticist could say was, "We don't know" at a time when clinical studies made alarming claims about the rate at which the human race was degenerating. It appears that the "scholarly" basis for Nazi eugenics came out of the clinic and not the laboratory (if that distinction is a valid one).

I do not know whether there were any German geneticists who counted themselves among the supporters of the eugenics program, nor do I have any information about geneticists who fled Germany between 1933 and 1945. However, the following references might be of some help in understanding the eugenics program itself and the relationship of genetics to that program:

Deutsches Schriftum im Krieg (Leipzig, 1943). A bibliography with a lengthy section of scientific works published by Germans during the war.

Weingartner, James J., "The SS Race and Settlement Main Office: Towards an Orden of Blood and Soil," Historian, November, 1971.

Thompson, Larry V., "Lebensborn and the Eugenics Policy of the Reichsführer-SS," Central European History, March, 1971.

Universitätstage 1966: Nationalsozialismus und die deutsche Universität, Veröffentlichung der Freien Universität Berlin (Berlin, de Gruyter, 1966), a chapter entitled "Die Bestätigung der NS-Ideologie in der Medizin unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Euthanasie", pp. 63-75.

Krieck, Ernst, "Medicine and the Philosophy of National Socialism," Journal of Higher Education (May, 1936).

Frank, Walter, Deutsche Wissenschaft und Judenfrage (Hamburg, 1941).

Gütt, Arthur, Die Rassenpflege im dritten Reich (Hamburg, 1940).

Honolka, Bert, Die Kreuzelschreiber: Ärzte ohne Gewissen: Euthanasie im dritten Reich (Hamburg, 1961).

Weinreich, Max, Hitler's Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany's Crimes Against the Jewish People (New York, YIVO, 1946).
(This would be particularly good, though somewhat biased.)

I am not sure that each of these references deals specifically with genetics, but they ought to contain some relevant material. You might also be interested in a study done by a committee of the American Neurological Association in 1934 on the advisability of eugenic sterilization in the U.S. The history of American eugenics is, by itself, fascinating; and I have found that American eugenic ideas had a great deal of influence on popular thought in Germany just before the Nazis came to power. That study is:

The Committee of the American Neurological Association for the Investigation of Eugenical Sterilization, Eugenical Sterilization: A Reorientation of the Problem (New York: Macmillan, 1936).

The Committee's opinion on the state of knowledge in genetics at that time was most informative, as I did not realize how very little was known then about hereditary diseases compared to what we know today.

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You may know from Mitscherlich's book that the "Final Solution" did indeed have competitors. The extermination of the Jews was not settled upon by Nazi leaders until after several other ideas had been discarded. Among those ideas were deportation and sterilization. Many concentration camp experiments were aimed at finding a fast and efficient method with which to sterilize very large numbers of men and women. At one time, the Nazis hoped to maintain the Jews (and other "degenerate" races) as a work force for the Reich. To do so, they would need to prevent the propagation of these races, and this is where sterilization became an important prospect. The accounts of those experiments may be found in Mitscherlich's book and probably in Dr. Hilberg's work as well. Gerhardt Reitlinger's book, The Final Solution (New York, 1961), may also prove interesting, as I believe he discusses the way in which extermination was finally chosen over alternative proposals as the answer to the "Jewish question."

I wish that I could be of more help in the area of genetics, but I hope these references will prove useful. I am quite interested in the specific questions which you raised in your letter to Dr. Hilberg, and I would greatly appreciate any information which you find and might be able to pass on.

Within the next six weeks, I will be completing a thesis on medicine in Weimar and Nazi Germany. One chapter will deal specifically with the way in which eugenic thought in the U.S. influenced German ideas about eugenic sterilization. One of my arguments is that German misperceptions of what was happening in America in the '20's paved much of the way for the acceptance of the Nazi eugenics program of the '30's. I would be glad to send you that material when it is finished, if it could be of any use to you.

It is possible that I will be at Stanford within the next two months to look at the medical school, and if so, I will certainly call. Should you have the time, I would really enjoy talking about this.

If I can be of any further help, please do not hesitate to ask. As I work on my thesis, more interesting resources keep popping up.

Again, many thanks for your letter.

Yours sincerely,

Bob Waldinger
Bob Waldinger